



**US Army Corps
of Engineers®**
New Orleans District

Project Fact Sheet

Project

Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet (MRGO) Closure

Purpose

In 2006, Congress directed the Secretary of the Army to plan for de-authorization of the MRGO. Just as Congress passed a law in 1956 authorizing the construction of the man-made waterway, it has now acted to close it. The MRGO was once a major commercial asset for the region, but decreasing traffic, environmental concerns, and Hurricane Katrina caused public sentiment about the project to change significantly over 50 years.

Congress authorized the MRGO's construction in 1956. The channel was completed in 1965. The MRGO also promoted commerce as it served as a safer and shorter route (by 40 miles) between the Port of New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. The first steps to have the project authorized were taken in the 1940s when local and national leaders joined with officials from the Port of New Orleans to lobby Congress for the federal government to build the channel. Those leading the effort to build the MRGO envisioned two purposes for this channel: 1) it would serve as a safer, quicker route to the Gulf, and 2) it would augment the navigation capabilities of the area. Their vision included expanded port facilities and a new Centroport, a vast, import/export complex complete with warehousing, a cargo airport, and road and rail connections. The Centroport was planned for the area that is now the north and south shores of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW) in the Almonaster-Michoud area in both Orleans and St. Bernard Parishes, as well as the area on the west side of the MRGO in St. Bernard Parish.

Though the Centroport never materialized, the MRGO proved to be a valuable commercial asset. The MRGO has been used by shallow- and deep-draft navigation vessels carrying a wide variety of commodities, including petroleum products, chemicals, forest products, manufactured goods, food and farm products, and machinery. Some of the oil and gas industry relies on the MRGO to service offshore oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico. Fishermen and shrimpers fish directly in the MRGO or use it to reach the Gulf of Mexico. NASA's Michoud Assembly Plant regularly sends its external propellant tanks aboard a special barge through the MR-GO to Florida where the Kennedy Space Center is located. Statistical data has shown that use of the MRGO steadily increased in terms of tonnage until its peak in 1978. At its height, the MRGO container ship traffic had a higher dollar value than bulk cargo ships using the Mississippi River.

In the last 20 years, use of the MRGO generally decreased. Also during this time, stakeholders have raised environmental, safety, and cost concerns about the channel. Coastal Louisiana is experiencing land loss at an alarming rate ~ 24 miles of shoreline per year, which equals about a football field every 38 minutes. At stake is the erosion of wetlands and barrier islands which have historically provided natural hurricane protection for south Louisiana. Some MRGO critics

argue that the shipping channel interferes with coastal restoration efforts by disrupting the balance of fresh and salt water that constitute the delicate wetlands ecosystem. Others argue that the MRGO serves as a “hurricane highway” and caused major flood damage during Hurricane Katrina.* The MRGO detractors also say the cost of maintaining and operating the channel exceeds its commercial benefit.

Location

The MRGO is a 36-foot deep, 500-foot bottom width, man-made waterway extending from the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal to the 38-foot depth contour in the Gulf of Mexico. The Corps will build a closure structure made of rock just south of Bayou La Loutre near Hopedale, Louisiana. The closure structure will be built at full federal expense, with the state providing lands, easements and rights of way as well as the operation and maintenance responsibilities of the closure structure upon completion. The structure will consist of more than 430,000 tons of stone and will completely block the MRGO. It will be 12-feet wide at the top and 450-feet wide at the bottom.

Sponsors

The construction of the closure structure is at full Federal expense, with the state’s Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority providing lands, easements and rights of way as well as the operation and maintenance responsibilities for the closure structure upon completion. The Corps is also working closely with officials in St. Bernard Parish.

Features

The MRGO includes two parallel jetties in Breton Sound that serve to reduce shoaling (sand buildup) in the navigation channel. With the de-authorization of the MRGO, the Corps will take no further action to maintain the channel. Rather than leave the jetties in place, the Corps is considering reusing the jetty rock material for coastal restoration projects, levee armoring, and the construction of the MRGO closure structure.

Status

On Thursday, June 5, 2008, the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works (ASA(CW)) forwarded the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Chief’s Report for the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) Deep-Draft De-Authorization Study to Congress. This action officially de-authorized the MRGO from the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway to the Gulf of Mexico in accordance with the Water Resources Development Act of 2007. Construction on the closure structure is scheduled to begin in fall 2008 and be completed by the end of May 2009.

The Corps is currently developing a comprehensive ecosystem restoration plan. This plan will cover areas affected by the MRGO. The recommendations from the plan will be integrated into the Corps’ Louisiana Coastal Area Program, which is already working to ensure the sustainable future of Louisiana’s coast.

Authority

Construction: An Act of March 29, 1956 and the Water Resources Development Acts of 1976, 1986 and 1996 Directive to plan for de-authorization: Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror, and Hurricane Recovery, 2006 (P.L. 109-234)

**A 2006 study by the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources found that the southeast – northwest channel of the MRGO from the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW) to the Gulf of Mexico does not contribute significantly to peak storm surge during severe storms where the wetland system is overwhelmed with water, and that closure in this section of the channel will not provide significant, direct mitigation of severe hurricane storm surge. An investigation by the Interagency Performance Evaluation Task Force (IPET) concluded in a draft final report (<https://ipet.wes.army.mil>) that storm surge and waves that inundated levees along the MRGO and surrounding area would have come from nearby Lake Borgne instead of up the channel from the Gulf of Mexico.*